

## Introduction

The subject of school siting merits a special section in this report because it is one of the key factors influencing decisions to walk or bicycle to school. The surveys revealed that the locations of the schools in Union and Warren were primary deterrents to walking and bicycling to school. Locating the schools in Union over one mile from the village center on a busy, high-speed arterial effectively eliminated walking and bicycling to this school. Locating the new elementary school in Warren across Rt. 90 from the former location that was in the primary village area, significantly reduced the number of children bicycling and walking to school. In contrast, Westbrook's decision to locate some of its schools on dead-end streets in quiet neighborhoods seems to make walking and bicycling more feasible. Two study schools are hoping to construct new schools in the near future. MSAD 40 has been approved to construct a new middle school in Waldoboro. The Miller School campus is being examined as a location and the hope is that the new school will not be any further from the village center than this. Peru is looking to construct its new school on the same campus and this is a good siting decision, as it is as close to a village center as exists in Peru.

## Analysis

The Maine Department of Education oversees the selection of schools and communities eligible for state funding for expansion, renovation or new construction. New construction projects are governed by the Maine Department of Education Regulation 61, and selected in a competitive process based on available capital construction funding on an annual basis. Chapter 60 of these regulations sets forth considerations used by the State Board in reviewing requests for approval.

Those considerations include renovation options, site alternative and enrollment analyses, proximity to community services, infrastructure, and recreational facility inventories. The Chapter sets forth broad guidelines for consideration – not a prescribed standard for on-site requirements. In general, a local school site selection

(or renovation) committee is formed to carry out the local process and submit application to the State.

Discussions with several of the administrators in our study schools and districts pointed out a concern that often the site requirements (locally generated or anecdotally expected) influenced the selection of school sites outside of existing village areas. It appeared less costly, if only school construction costs were considered, to select sites outside of the village and build new facilities. As we have noted in this study, such site selections contribute to school locations that make walking and bicycling less feasible and have other social costs associated to them, such as increased transportation costs and the health-related costs associated with less physical activity generated by bicycling or walking to school.

The regulations themselves require relatively comprehensive options analyses focused on a community-oriented process. The regulations require a documented community involvement process and consideration by the State Board (and the local committee) of elements such as:

- on *and* off site development costs
- 'Impacts on student transportation, vehicular traffic and student safety'
- 'Allowance for future expansion'

In addition, if a community has a locally designated growth area in a comprehensive plan, the site selection for new construction must be reconciled to that plan. Written justification for site selection is required. Finally, the regulation sets forth a requirement for the State Board of Education to involve, "all appropriate federal, state and local agencies," in consideration of a request for funding. However, the decision regarding final site approval rests solely with the State Board of Education.

Discussions with staff at the Maine State Planning Office noted an evolving standard in both the local school committees and implementation of the regulation. In the

past four years State Planning has worked to raise awareness of the topic of school location and community development through the publication of resource materials and conference discussions – with a recent conference on the topic held in spring 2002. Efforts have been made to encourage renovation over new construction, due consideration of residential area school location and a full accounting of the community impact of school site selection. An overall effort has been made to return to the concept of an *ideal school facility* as an integrated community component and not a stand alone *campus-like* development

Progress has been made in decompartmentalizing the site selection and evaluation process. There have been efforts to tie the school selection process into ongoing discussions in Maine regarding Smart Growth and community character. Clearly, the challenge lies in effectively encouraging the holistic review referenced in the regulations’ stakeholder review requirement.

Finally, the reality that renovation and in-town site selection is generally fraught with more complex mitigation issues than exurban development, must be weighed against the pressing demands for school expansion and limited state and local resources. It is often convenient to choose sites with lower public cost and mitigation requirements even if those site selections increase private/personal short and long-term costs in terms of travel time, reduced physical activity and increased private vehicle use. The local selection committees, oversight agencies, and the State Board of Education must continue to be encouraged to look at all long-term fiscal, community, and private costs associated with school site location choices.

## Recommendations

In that framework, a strategy to increase bicycling and walking to schools in Maine must focus on a strong, broad based community-wide review of site selection. Consideration of recreational amenities, sports fields, library access and other related school infrastructure should include proximate public (and private) facilities, and not simply on-site infrastructure. Similarly, consideration of location should include

proximity to core populations, residential districts, and existing infrastructure for safe walking and biking. Chapter 60 of the Maine Department of Education regulations provides a framework for that analysis. The challenge is to utilize that framework more comprehensively.

In discussions with several administrators in towns and districts in this study, it was clear that many of the behavioral impacts of school site selections were not fully quantified. It has proven to be much more difficult and costly, and generally less successful, to retrofit or reintegrate remote schools into a community. It is also much more difficult to obtain funding for improvements (especially off site) after schools are built.

The Maine State Planning office should continue efforts with the Board of Education to strengthen the site selection process at a local community level. MaineDOT and the public health community should become actively engaged in the selection process – as opposed to simply the mitigation process by assisting the Department of Education in examining the variety of transportation and health factors in school site selection.

It is clear that school expansion and site selection is a primary community planning function that has strayed, due to its unique pressures, funding mechanisms and requirements, from the general community planning process. Recent efforts to reintegrate and de-compartmentalize that process should be continued. It must be accepted that the best site and capacity improvement may not be the least costly in terms of capital construction. Equally important, there must be some analysis of long- term capital and operational costs such as busing requirements, traffic congestion mitigation, safety improvements, and functional length of school day to all site selection and renovation proposals to the State Board of Education – not withstanding the fact that many of these costs will be born at the local or non-education, state level.

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The State Board of Education should highlight positive examples of site selection and renovation proposals and offer technical assistance in a best-practice methodology. A cooperative effort among state agencies and public health officials to quantify some of the fiscal and non-fiscal long-term costs and benefits of site selection alternatives would be a beneficial tool for local decision makers.